

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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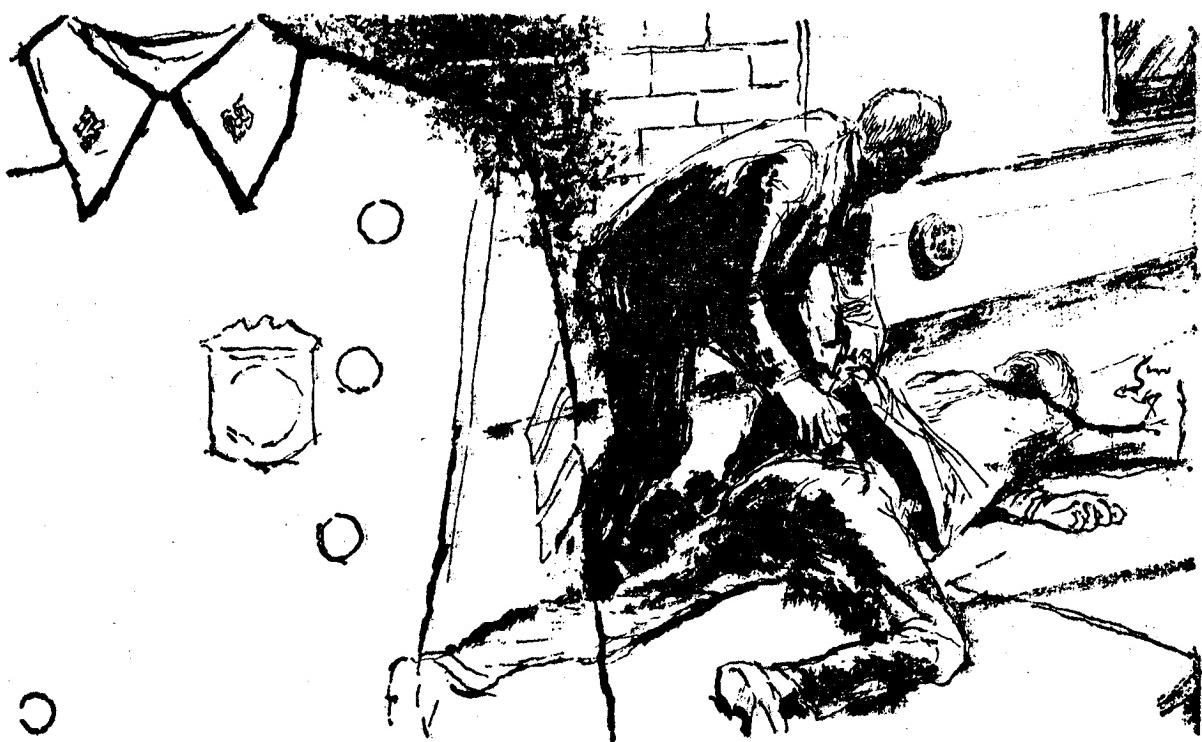
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FRAME-UP

by Jack Ritchie

THERE was a note on my desk when I reported for duty at four in the afternoon. I took a couple of aspirins and went to Captain Willard's office.

He waited until I closed the door.
"Sit down, Morgan."

Willard folded his hands then and studied me. "Don't you answer a phone? We've been trying to get you since three this morning."

I blinked at the sharp sunlight from the window behind him. "I sleep pretty heavy."

"How about knocks on your door? Do they make any impres-

sion? Peterson and James have been trying them since noon."

I shrugged slightly. "I went out after I woke up. They must have missed me." I watched his face. "Something important?"

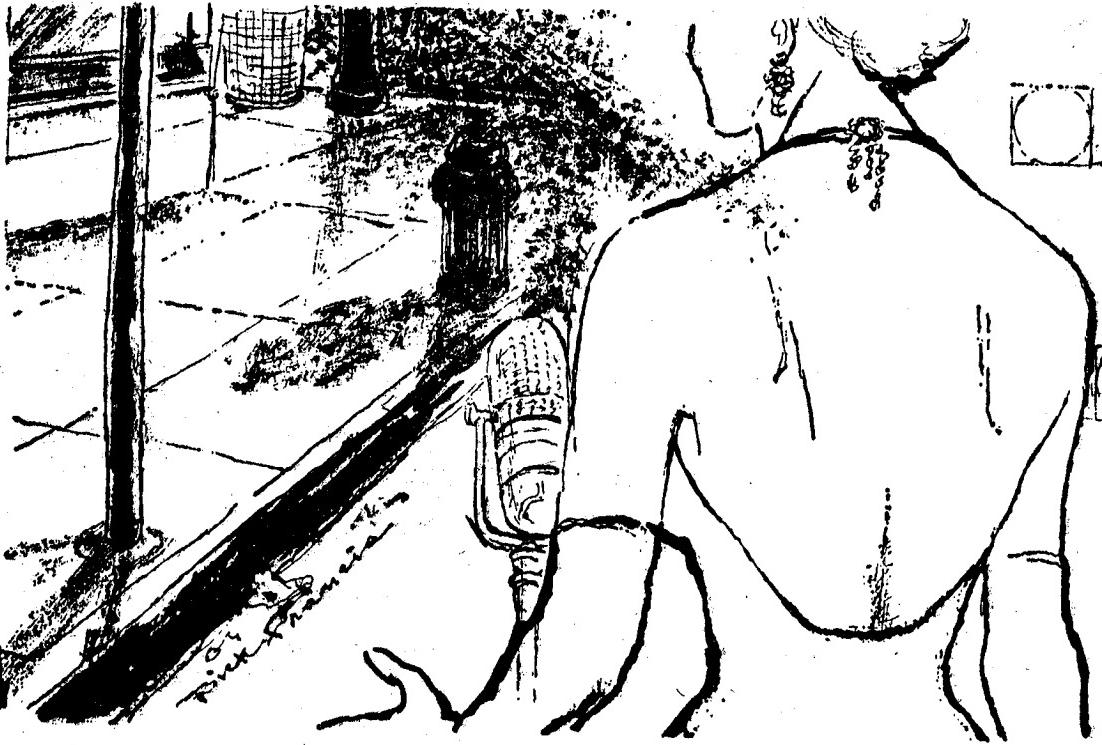
Willard grunted and then leafed through a few of the top pages in the manila folder on his desk. "You got a pretty good record, Morgan. The promotions came fast."

I smiled faintly. "But that isn't why you called me in."

His hand went to a complaint sheet on the corner of his desk. "Do you know anybody named

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Crawford? Willie Crawford?"
I thought about it. "No."

His gray eyes were on my face.
"Maybe I can help you. He's a
bartender at the Sicily Club."

I shook my head. "I wouldn't
know any of the bartenders there."

Willard looked at the sheet again.
"Crawford claims that you slugged
him on a dark street as he was
coming home from work at three
this morning. He also claims that
you took eight hundred dollars
from his wallet."

I got halfway out of my chair.
"He's a damn liar."

Willard waved me back down. "I
hope so. For your sake and the
department's." He flipped the
switch of his inter-com. "If Craw-
ford's come back, bring him in
here."

Crawford was a short, slight man
in his late forties and the cheek-
bone beneath his left eye was pur-
ple and swollen.

Willard watched me. "Do you
know him now, Morgan?"

*Remorse is most inconvenient. And bicarbonate on the rocks
will in no way assuage it. There is only one conclusion that
can be drawn: If killing someone is going to bother you, per-
haps you were meant for better things.*



"I've seen him."

Crawford did his talking to the captain. "Like I told you, I quit work and was walking down this street to where my car was parked, when Morgan steps out in front of me. He's drunk and mean."

Willard stopped him. "You saw him and you knew his name was Morgan?"

Crawford's eyes gleamed. "Sure. I seen him when he raided the club and shot Rick Sparrow."

Willard looked at me for a few seconds and then turned back to Crawford. "You said the street was dark. How did you know it was Morgan?"

"It wasn't that dark," Crawford said. "There was a few lights."

Willard seemed to sigh. "Go on."

"Morgan was drunk and mean. He stopped me. And the next thing I knew, he slugged me and I'm down on the ground. That's when he rifled my pockets."

Willard raised an eyebrow. "You just lay there and let him do that?"

Crawford flushed slightly. "I'm a little man, Captain, and I like to live. I don't put my life on the line to protect eight hundred dollars. I made like I was dead and hoped he would go away."

Willard looked at me. "Naturally you got a different story?"

I took a drag of my cigarette. "He's got the place right, but that's all. I saw him early this morning, but he was the one who was drunk.

He started making trouble for me."

"Did he have a reason to?"

"None I can figure. But a drunk doesn't need one."

Crawford's voice went high. "I was stone cold sober, Captain. I haven't had a drink in ten years. Ask the boss, Lucca. Ask anybody who works at the club."

"He smelled and acted drunk."

Willard rubbed his chin. "Why didn't you arrest him?"

I hesitated. "I figured he had troubles enough after I hit him."

Willard folded his hands. "Go on with your story."

"There isn't any more story," I snapped irritably. "When Crawford went down, I just made sure that he wasn't hurt bad and then I walked away. Somebody probably rolled him after I left."

Crawford leaned over the captain's desk. "I was never unconscious a second. Morgan went through my wallet and took the money."

Willard picked up the complaint sheet again and checked it. "That's enough for now, Crawford. We'll call you when we need you."

When Crawford was gone, Willard looked up. "You sure you got nothing to add?"

"No. It's my word against his."

"That's not good enough, Morgan. You know that."

I puffed at my cigarette. "It's a frame-up, Captain."

He raised an eyebrow. "Why would he want to frame you?"

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"I don't know."

"Would it have anything to do with the fact that you led the raid on the Sicily Club two weeks ago?"

"I don't see why that should bother him. He doesn't own the place. He's just a bartender."

Willard regarded me. "Tell me again why you didn't arrest him this morning."

I rubbed out my cigarette. "All right. I had a few drinks myself at the time. It would have meant a thirty-day suspension at least if I was found that way. That's why I couldn't bring him in."

Willard waited awhile before he spoke again. "You've been doing a lot of drinking lately, Morgan. I hear that and I can see it, too."

"Not on duty, Captain," I said.

He turned his swivel chair and looked out of the window. "Can't you forget Rick Sparrow?"

I said nothing.

"I know it'll take time, Morgan, but the bottle isn't going to help." He turned back to me. "There was nothing you could do. It was self-defense and you got a squad of police to back up your story."

He closed the manila folder. "Until we get this cleared up, you're under suspension."

I unpinned the badge from my wallet and shoved it across the desk. "Do you believe him or me?"

Willard didn't look at me. "I can't afford to believe anything. I'll have to find out for sure."

My partner, Pete Halleck, was waiting at our desks in the big room. He glanced at his watch and put on his hat. "We'd better shove off and start earning our pay."

I sat down. "You'll be going without me."

His blue water eyes got a little wider than usual. "What goes on?"

Pete's round face was thoughtful when I finished telling him. "Why would this Crawford," he asked, "make up a story like that?"

"You tell me."

Pete shook his head. "The name Crawford doesn't ring a bell. I never heard of him before." He smiled sadly. "What I would of done, Fred, was to turn in Crawford last night. Even if you got a suspension, it would have been better than this."

"The advice comes late."

"Honesty is the best policy," Pete said solemnly. He hesitated a moment. "There's one thing, though, Fred." Then he shook his head. "I guess I'd better not mention it."

"Go ahead. I'm not sensitive."

"Well," Pete said uneasily, "you said you were drinking and you know that when you do . . . you sort of don't remember things too clear."

He cleared his throat. "This drinking, Fred. It's not going to help you forget Rick Sparrow. Just look at the whole thing sensible. It was you or him."

I smiled slightly. "How would you know, Pete? You weren't there. You were catching bass in Michigan."

He nodded. "But you had plenty of witnesses."

I rubbed the back of my neck. "I still don't get it, Pete. Why would Sparrow try to kill me?"

"You were raiding his place."

"His places have been raided before, but all he ever did was smile and call his lawyer."

"It's been two years. Maybe he wasn't used to it anymore."

I shook my head. "No. He'd never get that mad."

Pete looked uneasy again. "It could have been about Helen Lawrence."

I was a little surprised. "He didn't have anything to worry about. All I did was talk to her a half a dozen times."

Pete smiled slightly. "Maybe he didn't know that."

I left Pete and went downstairs to my car. It was a little after five when I got to the Sicily Club.

I didn't see Crawford, but went to the bar and ordered a Manhattan.

Lucca joined me after a few minutes. He looked fresh and healthy and this part of the day was morning to him. He clicked his tongue. "You must have lost Pete someplace. He wouldn't let you drink on duty."

"What makes you think I'm on duty?"

He shrugged. "So it could be your day off. I don't keep track."

I put down my drink. "Where's Crawford?"

He smiled slowly. "He took a couple days off. Tell me your troubles."

I studied him. "You might know more about them than I do."

He touched his pencil-line mustache. "Not more, but as much. Crawford phoned and told me all about it. So interesting. You didn't have to do that to the poor man. If you needed money, I could have let you have a couple of bucks."

He saw the look in my eyes and quickly held up his hand. "My apologies. I'll assume that you're innocent."

He ordered a Martini. "You look hollow eyed, Morgan. Been sleeping bad?"

My eyes went automatically to the door that led to the upstairs rooms.

Lucca chuckled. "There's nothing up there now, Morgan. No tables, no wheels. The blood has been wiped off the floor and the mice are playing tag up there."

I lit a cigarette. "Figuring on going into business again? When I'm not around to stop you?"

He smiled and said nothing.

"If you're behind this, Lucca, I'll get real rough."

He sipped his Martini. "I'm not in this game. I'm just in the stands watching. But, of course, I got my favorite team."

"You shouldn't have too much to cry about, Lucca. I hear that you own the club now."

Lucca smiled slowly. "It was a partnership and I'm the survivor. So you see, Morgan, I bear no great hate for you. I even regard you with a certain fondness."

"Isn't life strange," he continued after a moment, "I thought you were here all those evenings to listen to Helen sing and all the time you were setting up the place for a raid."

I shook my head. "That wasn't why I was here, Lucca. But I'm a cop and I got eyes. You just got careless about covering things."

He looked at me with something like uncertainty. "Is that what you think, Morgan? We got careless? Maybe we thought we just didn't have anything to worry about." He emptied his glass. "You make me wonder about some things. Rick died mad . . . real mad."

I pushed aside my empty glass. "I'm here for Crawford's address."

Lucca nodded and went to the back room. He came back in a few minutes with a slip of paper. "There's something else for you to think about, Morgan. You been drinking heavy ever since you sent Rick to heaven. I hear you're the kind who forgets things when you do that. Count your money and see if you don't have any extra eight hundred dollars."

Outside I got in my car and began driving toward the south

side. The new Franklin Apartments weren't far out of my way; so I decide to stop there first.

Helen Lawrence opened the door. Her green eyes went over me coldly. "What do you want?"

"To talk to you," I said.

Her lips parted slightly. "I hear you're in trouble."

"And you like the taste of that? I suppose somebody phoned the good news?"

"Lucca did me that favor. I've been sitting here and smiling about the whole thing." She stepped aside. "Come in. I like to see what your conscience is doing to you. You look terrible, Morgan."

I took a chair. "I'm wondering how much you really hate me. You were there when Rick died and you saw what happened, but you want to convince yourself that it was murder. Do you think you hate me enough to do something about it? Enough to get together with Crawford?"

Her white teeth showed. "Think about it, Morgan. Let it eat you."

"But I have other thoughts, too. Somehow, I don't think Rick was a burning passion in your life. I don't think you've got it in you to feel strong about anything but a dollar bill."

She took a cigarette from the silver container on the cocktail table. "If you're on the side of the angels, why does killing Rick bother you so much?"

"Because he was a human being."

Not too good, but not bad enough to die. I don't like to be responsible for something like that. I know as well as anybody else that I'm not going to keep crying about it forever, but that doesn't help now."

She puffed the cigarette. "Suppose Crawford and I did get together. What could you do?"

"I don't know yet. But I'll think of something that hurts."

She let a few seconds pass. "I'm the kind of a woman who always takes care of herself first, Morgan. I admit that and I'm not ashamed of it. I miss Rick. And you're to blame . . . Well, anyhow, I'm not a fool and I don't waste my time on revenge. I shed tears for a day and then I look forward to tomorrow."

She smiled. "Lucca owns the club now. He would like to own me. And after a decent month of mourning, perhaps he will."

She followed me to the door. "Don't you wish you had Lucca's money, Morgan? Just think what you could look forward to."

I grinned faintly. "Why not love me for myself alone?"

Her face was serious. "I couldn't afford that."

It was five-thirty when I got into my car. I started for the south side again, but I knew I had to stop for a drink.

I was finishing my third shot and getting ready to leave the bar when Pete walked in. His eyes took in the customers at the bar.

I raised my voice. "I'm here." Pete hesitated and then came over.

"This is a Ripley coincidence, Pete," I said. "Three thousand bars in this town and you pick this one."

He flushed slightly. "The captain told me to sort of keep an eye on you."

"From this close?"

Pete rubbed his head. "You were in here so long I thought you might of given me the slip. I had to come in and check."

I shook my head. "How did you ever make sergeant? Would I leave without my car?"

He thought about it. "It's possible."

"How long have you been following me?"

"The Captain chased me right after you when you left headquarters."

I finished my drink and put the empty glass on the bar. "So he told you to keep an eye on me. Was that for my protection or for other people's?"

"I guess it was sort of for both reasons. He didn't say."

Pete looked at my empty glass. "I don't want to say anything, Fred, but don't you think that at a time like this you should go easy on the liquor?"

I rapped the glass on the bar. "I'm glad you reminded me. I'm still thirsty."

Pete shook his head. "I'll wait outside."

At seven-thirty, I picked my change off the bar and left.

Pete was sitting behind the wheel of my car. "I'll drive you home, Fred."

"I haven't had that many, Pete."

"Just the same, I think I ought to do the driving this time."

I threw away my cigarette. "All right, chauffeur. But not home. Take me to Crawford's place. I need a talk with him."

Pete's face was stubborn. "I think you ought to go home to bed. Get a little rest."

I jerked my thumb. "Get out."

Pete thought about it and then sighed. "All right. I'll take you to Crawford."

I got in the car and gave him the ignition keys.

He followed Sixteenth Street across the viaduct and made a left turn down into the valley. We passed the coal yards, the small factories and junk yards and stopped at the dimly lit corner of Ninth.

Pete led the way to the dirty red brick building and up the dusty steps to the second story. He stopped in front of one of the doors lining the hall and knocked.

I waited a few seconds and then tried my hand at it. "Open up, Crawford."

"He might not be home," Pete said.

"It's my guess that he's hiding behind the door."

Pete rapped again. "Open the

door, Crawford. Nobody's going to hurt you."

I was ready to put my shoulder to the door when the lock clicked and the door opened an inch. Crawford peered out.

I pushed into the room.

Crawford backed away, his face pale, and his eyes flicked from me to Pete and back again. "Keep away from me."

I moved toward him, but Pete gripped my arm. "We can't have any rough stuff, Fred. I don't want you to get in any more trouble."

I shook him off. "All right. I'll try sugar." I studied Crawford. "This frame wasn't your idea. You don't have a reason for it. Whose mind is behind it?"

Some of the color was back in Crawford's face. "Nobody's behind it. Everything happened the way I said it did."

"Sure," I said. "But let's hear your answer if I make you five hundred dollars richer."

He shook his head, but I could see the interest in his eyes.

"It's worth a thousand to me."

He shook his head again.

I didn't have the money, but I thought I'd see what the words would do. "Think about two thousand."

He licked his lips. "You can't buy what doesn't exist."

My temper snapped. "Don't try to hold me up. I got an easier and cheaper way to make you remember the truth."

Pete's hand was on my arm, again. "Try it some other time, Fred."

I glared at him, but his expression was obstinate.

Then I relaxed. "All right, Pete. But you can't be my shadow forever. Crawford's going to face me alone some time."

Pete drove me home and followed me into my apartment.

I got a bottle and a glass. "Have I got your permission to drink?"

"It's your place and your liquor."

I grinned. "You're hoping that I pass out?"

He smiled a little. "Just hoping you get some sleep."

I finished the glass in a couple of swallows. "I won't fight it, Pete. I can't do any real drinking while you're with me anyway."

Pete sat down and picked up a magazine. "I'll stay awhile."

I went into the bedroom and set the alarm clock for twelve-thirty. Pete would be off duty at twelve and I doubted if Willard had anybody else assigned to watch me.

I took off my shoes and lay on the bed. Sleep came fast and I was at Lucca's again. I saw Rick at the head of the stairs and the surprise on his face. Then the animal anger flashed in his eyes as he reached for the gun.

I saw the life drop from him as my two slugs caught him and I stepped aside once more to let him roll down the stairs and sprawl dead at the bottom.

I woke up in a cold sweat and reached for the bottle. I took a big drink and let it do its work.

And this time in the sleep that came I was driving to Crawford's address again and I was alone with him. I didn't talk money; I just moved forward and his face got whiter and whiter.

When I opened my eyes, the door to my living room was open. Two silhouettes were outlined in the doorway.

I snapped on the night lamp and looked at the clock. It was twenty minutes before midnight.

Captain Willard watched me swing out of bed and sit on the edge of it.

He turned to Pete. "You were in the living room all the time?"

Pete nodded. "I never left."

"You didn't fall asleep?"

"No, sir, Captain," Pete said. "Not a second. He couldn't of got by me."

My head was pounding and my mouth was dry. I reached for a cigarette. "What's this all about?"

Willard moved into the room. "Where's your gun, Morgan?"

I indicated the chair where my suitcoat hung.

He took the .38 out of the holster and broke it open. "It's been fired."

His eyes went to the window and he moved in that direction. "There's a fire escape out here."

"Damn it, Pete," I snapped. "What's this all about?"

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"Somebody shot Crawford about forty-five minutes ago."

Willard put the gun in his pocket and looked at me. "You convinced Pete that you were going to sleep. You came in here and closed the door. But instead of going to sleep, you went down the fire escape and drove to the Sicily Club. You waited in the alley for Crawford to take a cigarette break, and then you shot and killed him."

I stared at Willard. "I was asleep right here. Why would I want Crawford dead? He's no good to me if he can't talk."

Willard's eyes seemed to bore into mine. "Maybe you just think you were asleep. We all know about your drinking and what it does to your sense and memory."

He turned to Pete. "As soon as he gets his shoes on, take him to headquarters and book him."

Pete took the ignition keys out of his pocket. "We'll have to use your car, Fred. Mine's still parked near that bar."

I stopped tying my shoelaces and looked up into Willard's eyes. I started to say something, but he spoke first. "You better shave, Morgan. It won't hurt to look good."

"Captain . . ." I said.

He glared at me. "When I want you to talk, I'll let you know. Understand that?"

Our eyes held.

"All right," I said after awhile, "we'll do it that way."

He glanced at his watch. "I'll see

you two at headquarters." At the door he fingered the Yale lock and looked back. "Don't let him out of your sight, Pete. That means stick with him wherever he goes."

Our eyes met and then Willard left.

I went to the bathroom and Pete followed me.

He sat on the edge of the bathtub and watched me lather my face. "I don't know what to say, Fred. Maybe it was just one of your spells and you didn't know what you were doing."

"Or I could have dreamed it."

He watched silently while I took my time shaving. When I was almost through, I spoke softly. "You claim you never heard of Crawford before. But I didn't have to tell you where he lived. You even knew which door to go to."

He had a cigarette half way up to his mouth. He stopped and waited.

I kept talking. "After I fell asleep you took my gun and went out to kill Crawford."

When I looked away from the mirror, Pete had the snub-nose .38 in his hand.

I met his eyes. "Why did you kill him, Pete? That's something I don't understand."

He smiled almost sadly. "I saw that you could have bought the truth from him, Fred. If I hadn't been there."

I stopped toweling my face. "What's it all about, Pete?"

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He touched the lapel of his suit. "I'm just a dumb cop, but this is a two-hundred dollar suit."

He grinned slowly. "I've been selling my protection, Fred. To Rick and Lucca. To half a dozen other places."

He chuckled. "You were part of it too, but you never knew it. I told them you were my partner, Fred. It was safer that way. They might have had ideas about getting rid of me if they thought I operated alone."

I gripped the towel. "So that's why Rick tried to kill me. He thought I was double-crossing him."

Pete nodded. "After Rick died, I told Lucca that you were double-crossing me, too. And that you meant to scare him into handing out bigger money. I promised to get rid of you. Some way."

He shook his head. "You're not lucky, Fred. While I was on vacation you shouldn't have been an

eager beaver." He raised the gun. "I hate to do this, Fred, but there's no other way. I'll tell the Captain that you tried to jump me."

The shot brought surprise to his face and he clutched at his right arm above the wrist. I darted forward and caught the .38 slipping from his fingers.

Captain Willard stood in the doorway. He holstered his gun. "I needed to hear it from his own lips, Fred."

The surprise was still on Pete's face as he looked at us.

"You made a slip, Pete," I said. "The Captain and I caught it at the same time."

Willard nodded. "How could Morgan have driven to the Sicily Club when you had his car keys in your pocket?"

The blood was spoiling Pete's two hundred dollar suit, but he didn't find any sympathy from either one of us.



Every Sunday

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